



Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society 香港海豚保育學會

Joint Press Conference by Green Sense and Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society

Press Release

Proposed import of beluga whales by Ocean Park doomed to failure Concept of importing wild dolphins for entertainment misleads the public

Ocean Park is one of the major tourist attractions in Hong Kong, which has been keeping large marine creatures (e.g. dolphins) in the park to lure more tourists. Regrettably, in order to boost visitor numbers further, the park now plans to capture even more marine creatures from the wild, including beluga whales, walrus and bottlenose dolphins, for entertainment purposes. The conservation issues involved in these imports have mostly gone under the radar of the public. For instance, population assessments of these wild populations for sustainable capture have been inadequate, and wild dolphins and whales immensely suffer physically and psychologically during the capture and transport process. The park also forces these dolphins and whales to perform unnatural behaviours, while these entertainment shows not only result in little benefit for their conservation in the wild, but also completely distort the public image of wild dolphins and whales. Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society and Green Sense strongly urge the Hong Kong public to be aware of the role of Ocean Park in marine conservation and animal welfare and sincerely hope the Hong Kong government can keep Ocean Park's operation under proper surveillance.

Proposed plan of beluga import: critical conservation and animal welfare issues

In 2005, Ocean Park announced their plan to build an Arctic exhibit (to be opened between 2011 and 2012) and proposed to import belugas and walrus into the exhibit for entertainment purposes. This news has raised serious concerns by local and international conservation organizations. Belugas live in Arctic waters, and are not suitable to be kept in captivity, especially in a tropical region. Their survival rate and success rate of breeding have been low in captivity. As a result, oceanaria need to continuously capture more wild belugas to replenish their stock, which can become a serious conservation issue. For example, the National Museum of Marine Biology and Aquarium in Taiwan has imported ten belugas since 2002 in two shipments. Even with

their first-class facility and expertise, at least half of them have already died due to their inability to survive in captivity.

Ocean Park always expresses to the public that capturing animals from the wild is their last resort to obtain animals. However, many species in their proposed collection have to be captured from the wild. They have found no other alternatives for exchange with or purchase from other facility. And the park cannot explain why their existing dolphin stock is not sufficient and whether there is enough justification to capture more wild dolphins to jeopardize their survival in natural environments. Moreover, Ocean Park repeatedly claimed to study the beluga population abundance before any capture takes place. But without any obvious evidence of sustainable catch, they have already spent huge amounts of money to build a facility specifically for keeping beluga whales.

Superficial education and vague conservation message

As a non-profit making organization, Ocean Park received valuable public land from the Hong Kong government at no cost. So they surely have the responsibility to serve the Hong Kong public while avoiding to cause any conservation dilemmas and damaging Hong Kong's reputation internationally as contributing to wildlife conservation issues. Instead, Ocean Park keeps bringing in animals from the wild to jeopardize their conservation status and own welfare with only one aim: to generate more profits from tourists. Moreover, the park has always maintained secrecy on how they capture and keep their wild dolphins and have always conveyed false notions to their visitors. Their irresponsible acts have blurred the line between public education and entertainment. For example:

1. Ocean Park deliberately avoids mentioning that their dolphins were member of wild populations (or the offspring of wild animals). The visitors may think that dolphins are human properties that they can be caught from the wild any time to generate profit and entertain people. The public may also think that dolphins can adapt well in captivity and willingly perform tricks every day. Ocean Park has not been educating the visitors diligently on protecting wild dolphin populations and their living habitats either. All they have been doing is to boast of their husbandry practice in order to shift the public attention from real conservation issues of capturing wild animals and animal welfare of their captive animals.
2. Ocean Park deliberately sends a wrong message to the public that visiting the park is just like getting close to nature and one can only appreciate the dolphins by attending

the dolphin shows or even spending more money to touch them. For example, the park's activity "Dolphin Encounter" has misled the public that true appreciation of dolphins can come only from touching and interacting with them and the information conveyed to the participants are superficial and unbalanced.

Undoubtedly, this activity is strictly a commercial activity to generate more profit for "conservation" in which dolphins are forced to become a money-making machine. There is tremendous amount of information on wild dolphins available on the internet. And in Hong Kong the public can observe the Chinese white dolphins in their natural habitats very close to home from a boat or from the shores of Hong Kong. Obviously, it is unnecessary to attend dolphin shows and to touch dolphins in order to learn more about their biology and ecology.

3. We find the educational content of the courses held by the Ocean Park Academy deliberately avoiding the facts about the living habitats of wild whales and dolphins, their complex social structure and emotions and conservation issues in their natural environment. Understandably, they never mention where their animals were initially captured and the cruel process of such capture.

Our requests to Ocean Park...

- Suspend the construction of the Arctic exhibit or modify the exhibit to become an education and conservation centre for better presentation of accurate and balanced views of marine conservation messages to the visitors;
- Stop any plan of importing belugas, walrus and other wildlife into Ocean Park, and pledge not to catch any whales, dolphins and large marine creatures to avoid conservation dilemmas;
- Eventually end the dolphin "circus shows" for entertainment purpose and use the dolphins only for free public educational activities;
- Include information on dolphin capture process, natural behaviours and daily lives of dolphins and whales in their living habitat, as well as the differences between wild and captive dolphins into their public awareness programme, including the courses of Ocean Park Academy.

Our next steps...

- We will send out educational booklets to all local schools to convey the accurate message of whale and dolphin conservation (including the hidden truth about captivity), in order to provide more balanced views to local students on proper concepts of marine conservation;
- We will organize sustainable eco-tours, including land-based observation of wild Chinese white dolphins, to raise public awareness on proper ways to observe animals in their natural settings without disturbing their daily lives, and on the importance of wildlife conservation;
- We sincerely urge the Professional Teachers' Union to stop selling Ocean Park admission tickets until the park promises not to import belugas or any other marine



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- mammal and other wild animals with conservation issues;
- Even though Ocean Park is not under any government department, we will contact the Hong Kong government to urge for their surveillance on the park operation.

For further enquires, please contact...

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